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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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URGE PROTECTION FOR WHOOPING CRANES

As the whooping cranes--North America's largest and rarest migratory birds--head south from Canada this month in their annual fall migration, the public is urged to allow these majestic white creatures to make their way unharmed to their Texas wintering grounds. The plea was made jointly today by the National Audubon Society and the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior.

In their southward flights the whooping cranes--so named for their blaring, hornlike call--traditionally pass down through North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma into the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge on Texas' Gulf Coast. The major stopover is along the Platte River in Nebraska. Here the giant birds generally spend a number of days resting and feeding.

Since the cranes have been protected by Federal law since 1913, persons shooting or otherwise molesting them are committing a Federal offense as well as jeopardizing the species' uphill fight for survival. Seriously threatened with extinction, a mere 21 "whoopers" remained on the continent at the last count, made in April.

In their migration south last fall at least two cranes from the diminishing band were killed by gunners, one in Saskatchewan and one in Kansas, in spite of Canadian and United States regulations. Standing four feet tall and having a wing-spread of seven feet, the average whooping crane is very conspicuous. In flight, its long neck and spindly legs are completely outstretched. Its white body and black wing-tips make the bird easily discernible and its resonant "whoop" can be heard two or three miles away.

The Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Audubon Society reported that conservation departments of the States and provinces through which the whooping cranes migrate are cooperating in an educational campaign on behalf of the birds. Newspapers, radio, television, and such groups as garden clubs, sportsmen's organizations, and Audubon Junior Clubs are being enlisted in the drive to acquaint the public with the necessity of stopping the illegal shooting of the cranes.

The whooper is sometimes mistaken for a snow goose, white pelican, American egret, or whistling swan. Gunners, therefore, are being urged to refrain from shooting at any large white bird and to report the sighting of birds that might be whooping cranes to the nearest conservation officer.

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